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Response to Ngugi wa Thiong'o - 2

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Response

David Chioni Moore

Let me begin by noting how honored I am to be responding to Professor Ngugi. By training I am a literary scholar of Africa, and to be an Africanist scholar at any time in the past three decades, anywhere in the world, has necessarily meant that one is deeply acquainted with the writings of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. From my first reading of his novel *Weep Not, Child* to my subsequent reading of almost all the rest of his fiction and cultural critique, I have been shaped by Ngugi's creative imagination and analytic bite. My admiration, of course, has by no means meant universal agreement with all that he has said, and it is rewarding to know that Professor Ngugi considers vigorous engagement to be the intellectual's highest duty.

Thus in my response to Professor Ngugi I will begin by outlining the ways in which I agree with what he has offered, but then I will turn at greater length to yet unsettled questions. To briefly preview both halves of that equation, I will note the following. First, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and I are in complete accord that Africa is beset by economic problems, many of them generated by the system of global capitalism, and that Africa's many languages are in danger. Second, Ngugi and I are also in complete agreement that Africa's economic problems should be resolved, and that Africa's many languages should be preserved. But my third point—and to this point I will devote the most attention—is that I see no evidence that the preservation and enrichment of Africa's many languages has any clear connection with the resolution of Africa's economic problems. Indeed, my own view is that African nations should adopt a policy of diglossia, embracing both English or French *and* the countless, invaluable, historically African languages, as the best way to promote the survival of those African languages. Let me now turn to the specifics of the arguments.

Indeed it is true, as Ngugi has described, that the vast majority of the African continent is, and has been for some time, in varying states of economic crisis. According to the United Nations, fifteen of the twenty poorest countries in the world are in sub-Saharan Africa. Africa's fifty-three nations and 800 million residents as a totality have a combined economic output only slightly larger than that of the Netherlands, with seventeen million people, and certainly less than that of the U.S. states of California, Texas, or New York. Were my Ph.D. in eco-

nomics or were Ngugi's main topic political economy and not language and culture, I would suggest that Ngugi errs when he attributes Africa's *current* situation to neocolonialism. The colonial and neocolonial eras to which Ngugi refers are over, for better or worse, and we are now in an age of economic *globalization*, when cities in South Carolina compete with cities in northern Mexico for German automobile factories; when Chinese and Malaysian petroleum companies are key international actors in Sudan; and when a telephone call to my credit card company puts me in touch with a customer service representative in India, busy faking an American midwestern accent.

In this regard, in Professor Ngugi's home country of Kenya, according to the most current data gathered by *The Economist*, the four main export destinations are, in order, Uganda, the United Kingdom, Tanzania, and the Netherlands. Kenya's four largest *import* sources are, again in order, the United Arab Emirates (no doubt for petroleum), the U.K., Japan, and then India. The former colonial power England is second on both lists, but the U.K. accounts for only eleven percent of Kenya's exports and seven percent of its imports. The United States is on neither top-four list. And of the seven total nations listed on these two top-four lists, two are European, two are African, two are Asian, and one is in the Middle East. Thus, at least as far as economic relations are concerned, Kenya is *not* in a neocolonial situation. It is in the throes of globalization.

But our main concern here is, of course, language, the domain in which Ngugi has made many of his most famous statements. Indeed, as Ngugi suggests, many of Africa's hundreds of languages are in great danger, not only of the cultural and political marginalization that Ngugi describes, but even more profoundly of what David Crystal has called "language death" — the absolute disappearance of a given mother tongue. It is important to recognize that language death is not only an African phenomenon. The total number of languages in the entire world is subject to vigorous debate, and depends heavily on how readily one declares closely related speech communities to have separate "languages," but a current central estimate is roughly six thousand. Sadly, experts estimate that as many as half of them might disappear within one hundred years, thirty-one percent of them from Africa.

However, it is not the case that simply recognizing the linguistic problems will help to solve them. This can be demonstrated by looking back to similar announcements over forty years ago. As you know,

here in 2003, we have read Ngugi powerfully advocate the development of African-language writing. But as we also know from his essay, similar calls promoting African writing have been made since at least the 1930s, in the case of South Africa, and at least since 1962 in terms of the entire African literary community. Ngugi describes the landmark 1962 Mbari conference of African writers held at Makerere University College in Uganda (though he was too modest to note that he himself was among the youngest participants at that convention). What is interesting is that shortly after the Mbari conference, calls were published in *many* venues for African writers to write in African languages. Thus what Ngugi advocates today — that African writing should be done in African languages, particularly in response to a growing linguistic Anglification of the continent — has been a well-known position for over forty years. Yet in practice African-language writing, in literature and in other venues, is quite rare.

The reason, I submit, is one of writing economics. Kenya has about thirty million people and an admirable literacy rate of over eighty percent. If one writes in Gikuyu, one reaches about twenty percent of the population, or six million people, only some of whom are rich enough to purchase books. If one writes in Luo, Luya, or Kamba, one reaches just ten percent of Kenya's population, and the figures for the twenty or more additional Kenyan tongues are even smaller. In contrast, the Kenyan who writes in English has immediate access to over one billion potential readers in more than sixty nations, including readers in almost twenty different African states. A roughly similar story might be told for a Wolof-speaking writer in francophone Senegal, or an Umbundu-speaking writer in lusophone Angola. Thus for better or worse, the vast majority of African writers in the past four decades have chosen to write in European languages, even as they are aware of powerful pro-African arguments such as those presented by Ngugi.

To combat the limitations of small audiences in each individual African language, Ngugi strongly emphasizes *translation*. But why has this so rarely been undertaken? The economic problem here is that, given the large number of languages spoken in Africa as a whole (over a thousand on the entire continent) and inside many African nations in particular (over twenty in Kenya alone), an even larger number of translators would be needed. A community of twenty languages contains, for example, close to 200 language-pairs that would demand translation. To simply handle the most prominent ten percent of Africa's tongues (one hundred languages) would require nearly five

thousand language-pair specializations for direct translation, at a time when, to the best of my knowledge, not a *single* bilingual dictionary exists for any African language-pair. What is more, the market for works of literature in each of these many languages would quite often be very small—too small, in too many cases, to make translation and publication an economically viable proposition. To be sure, the number of translators needed would be massively reduced if languages such as English, French, or Swahili were used as intermediaries, but the fiscal barriers would still be troublingly high, and the presence of a European intermediary tongue would restore precisely the configuring presence that Ngugi seeks to ban. The big-picture linguistic challenges faced by African languages are, in sum, quite large, and I am not wholly certain how one might meet them.

At least part of the solution might lie in the *reversal* of an argument that Ngugi makes in his own essay. Ngugi begins by decrying Africa's dire economic straits, and then goes on to pose as a partial solution an increased embrace of Africa's languages, particularly in their written form. Ngugi is not specific as to how the use of African languages will enhance Africa's economic status. At present, for example, Cameroon's two official languages are English and French, spoken by all of its elites as well as by fractions of the general population, sometimes in variant or indigenized forms. But though I agree that the promotion of writing in Bamileke, Fang, Duala, Fulfulde, and many others among Cameroon's some 200 languages would *culturally* benefit the nation and individual ethnicities, I cannot see how the establishment of five or fifty or two hundred additional written traditions would make the country monetarily richer.

For better or worse, today the economic world is global, and the language of that economic globe is English. Though Ngugi asserts that "African languages must be at the frontline in the discovery and invention of knowledge in the sciences and technology," a sentiment also echoed by the Asmara Declaration, it is unclear how the establishment and pursuit of techno-scientific programs in, for example, Zambia's roughly thirty languages would enhance that nation's global techno-scientific status. It is worth noting that even wealthy continental European nations have largely turned their science, technology, and cross-border business over to English. In the field of science, this is unambiguous, and has been the case for many years. In 1973, for example, the main publication of the prestigious Institut Pasteur in Paris, *Les Annales de l'Institut Pasteur*, received about fifteen percent of its sub-

missions in English. By 1987, this had risen to almost 100 percent, prompting Institute officials from that point forward to publish the journal exclusively in English.¹ It is for this reason that today French scientists writing for this French journal publish their work in English, as do the German, Spanish, Dutch, and every other nationality scientists who publish with Pasteur.

In business, many leading global companies, such as the Swiss-Swedish industrial giant Asea Brown Boveri, require all upper-level writing and discussion to be done in English, even when both writer and recipient are Swedes. My own cousin, Flavia Chioni, is an Italian pulmonary physician, but she receives almost all her technical information in English. In Germany, English has become a near-universal second language for the young. The surprises and even ironies here abound, even in the field of African literary studies. I might mention here Charles Bodunde's fine 2001 edited volume, *African Language Literatures and the Political Context of the 1990s*, published in Germany by the prestigious Bayreuth African Studies Series. Notably, even this Germano-African volume was written and published entirely in English.

What to make of this worldwide hegemony of English, which obtains not only in Africa and in powerful European nations, but also in important swaths of Asia? What to make of the fact that significant economic benefits now flow to emerging economies with a high competence in English, such as India, the Philippines, Ireland, and Ghana? What to make of the fact that today Singaporeans learn English not due to neocolonial imposition, but because English is the best way to sell their technology to Swedes and South Koreans? I wish to argue that Ngugi has mistakenly set up an either/or situation in which English is explicitly seen as the enemy of African-language preservation. I propose, instead, that modern nations, including African nations, are much better advised to embrace diglossia; that is, the simultaneous promotion of two sets of languages, in this case English (or French) and the full range of African languages. Broad national mastery of a European tongue would ensure economic viability on the global scene, while African languages would remain the vehicle of culture and identity. Of course, the trick here is to keep the English/mother-tongue balance in equilibrium, and prevent what is known as "domain attrition." I quote Johan Van Hoorde, a senior official with a Dutch-language association:

Dutch may not be threatened with extinction in the short or medium term, but it is in danger of losing scope. It could eventually become just a colloquial language, a kitchen-table language, a language you use at home to speak with your family — the language you can best express your emotions in—but not the one you use for the serious things in life, like work, money, science and technology.²

To be sure, maintaining an even balance between English and traditional languages will be one of the most difficult assignments for any culture in the twenty-first century. But I think that the only plausible strategy is to tackle that assignment head-on. In this regard, I would like to challenge Ngugi on the binary or even exclusionary way in which he goes about representing the African-language writing scene. Throughout his essay he seems diametrically to oppose Africa to Europe, colonial and neocolonial economic power to indigenous resistance, and African languages to tongues like French and English. It seems that north is north and south is south and never the twain shall meet.

The more tangled, less binaristic truth, however, is that in most places African-language writing has been intertwined with European tongues for as long as there *has* been African writing. The great majority of written African languages today exist so because they were first codified and put into print by European or American Christian missionaries. Thus, the first or nearly-first written text in most sub-Saharan African languages has typically been the Christian Bible.³ For example, the first published book in Yoruba is John Bunyan's 1860 *Pilgrim's Progress*, followed by the 1900 Yoruba Bible. In Xhosa, *Pilgrim's Progress* appears in 1867 and is followed by the Bible in 1887. And in Zulu—the language whose 1930s African debates Ngugi invokes—the first written publication was the New Testament in 1865, followed by the entire Bible in 1883. No book in Zulu was written *by* a Zulu until 1922. Writing is a technology first developed in various world locations—China, the east Mediterranean, and Mesoamerica—but alphabetic writing, print, and print literacy historically belong principally to Europe. Thus in embracing print for Africa—and I support Ngugi in this embrace—Ngugi countenances a highly European and Christian-originated tradition.

Moving from the origins of African-language writing to the present day, I now turn to the powerful Asmara Declaration, which Professor Ngugi substantially contributed to and which he quotes at length in

footnote 22 of his essay. I note that the Asmara text overwhelmingly, indeed almost exclusively, emphasizes Africa. Unsurprisingly, the phrase *African languages* is repeated fifteen times in the short but key excerpt that Ngugi provides. The passage also refers to “African languages and literatures,” African children, African minds, African peoples, African soil, African unity, and much more. The only acknowledgment of any forces or phenomena outside of Africa in the broader Asmara Declaration includes two mentions of the African diaspora, one note of “writers and scholars from around the world,” one note of “the UN and international organizations that serve Africa,” and finally one mention of “African countries created by colonial and neocolonial forces and their local allies.”⁴

What is missing, however, in Ngugi’s recitation of the Asmara Declaration’s rhetoric of African self-sufficiency, is the other, decidedly non-African statement found later in the Declaration. This statement thanks the major financial and logistical sponsors of the convention, who include, among others, Pennsylvania State University, New York University, the University of Iowa, the Alliance Française, the British Council, the British Centre for Literary Translation, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the World Bank. My concern here is not at all that the various institutions have strongly supported the Against All Odds movement. Indeed, I think that this initiative is a superb way for these universities, foundations, and quasi-governmental agencies to support the literary arts. My concern, instead, is with the disjuncture between the actual globality of the African language situation, the actual globality of the Against All Odds movement, the actual globality of the distinguished California-based scholar to whom I am responding, and the relatively isolationist or internalist narrative offered by his essay.

Let me conclude, then, with simple restatement. Without any doubt, the project of African political and economic advancement is crucial, and without a doubt, the project of sustaining African languages is also crucial. But the way to achieve the former is not, I argue, by taking only an internalist view towards the latter. Global languages—principally English but also, in Africa, French, Portuguese, Arabic, and Swahili—are essential to the future of Africa in the globalizing world. Africa’s youth widely demand such languages, just as their elders are equally right to insist on the preservation and development of Africa’s historic language traditions—wherever in the world these activities may occur. Right here in St. Paul, Minnesota, the Hmong language of

southern China and Laos, which was first committed to print in 1952 by Christian missionaries, is undergoing a small renaissance of its own, as poets, storytellers, and university professors collaborate on a new Hmong journal, *Phan Dao*, which aims to bridge continents and generations. Indeed, just a few days ago, every resident of St. Paul received in the mail the city's 2004–05 *School Choices and Services Catalog*. This bulky catalog, published by a city that is wealthy by any global standard, is divided into four equal sections, replicating identical material in English, Spanish, Hmong, and Somali, whose orthography, after a century or more of debate, was regularized (using the Latin alphabet) only in 1972. To reiterate, four languages from four continents appeared in one schools document in the American upper Midwest, made possible, in part, by the economic power of English. May we live and learn not in glorious separation, but in inerasable embrace.

Notes

1. Garfield 1989.
2. Crystal, p. 31.
3. It is worth noting the theologico-linguistic difference between Christianity and Islam in this regard. In the Muslim faith, the Quran is accepted as authoritative only in its original Arabic. Thus, the great spread of Islam across Africa was not generally accompanied by translations of its holy text into local tongues, or the commitment of those tongues to print. Christian missionary work, in contrast, has been quite zealous in translating the Bible, leading in so many cases to an orthography for the local tongues for the very first time.
4. The full Asmara Declaration (which Ngugi only excerpts in his *Macalester International* essay) has not yet, to my knowledge, been officially published. It is, however, available in many places on the Internet, such as at <http://www.queensu.ca/snid/asmara.htm>. Furthermore, Ngugi has published it in his essay reflecting on Julius Nyerere (2002).

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